

# REIGN OF ERROR

The Hoax of the Privatization  
Movement and the Danger  
to America's Public Schools

Diane Ravitch

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**by Diane Ravitch**

ALFRED A. KNOPF



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## REIGN OF ERROR

The Hoax of the Privatization Movement  
and the Danger to America's Public Schools

From one of the foremost authorities on education and the history of education in the United States, whom the *Wall Street Journal* has called "whistleblower extraordinaire," an incisive, comprehensive look at American public schools today. Here, Ravitch argues persuasively against those who claim our system is broken, beyond repair, and obsolete and she makes an impassioned but reasoned call to stop the rising "privatization movement" that is draining students—and funding—from our public schools. Her book puts forth a detailed plan of what needs to happen to schools and with public policy to insure the survival of this institution so basic to our democracy.

In *Reign of Error*, Ravitch makes clear that, contrary to the statements being made about disastrous public school test scores and graduation rates, these figures are the highest they've ever been in history--and that dropout rates are at their lowest, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a no-stakes test for children of all races.

Ravitch puts forth a chapter-by-chapter breakdown of what can be done to preserve public school education, making clear what is right with our education system, how policy makers are failing to address the root causes of educational failure, and discussing in detail how to fix these problems.

DIANE RAVITCH was born in Houston, and graduated from Wellesley College and Columbia University. She is a Research Professor of Education at New York University. She was appointed by President Clinton in 1997 and 2001 to the National Assessment Governing Board. Ravitch is the author of ten previous books. She is a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and the United Federation of Teachers John Dewey Award for Excellence in Education. Ravitch lives in Brooklyn.

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Praise for *Diane Ravitch's*

THE DEATH AND LIFE OF THE  
GREAT AMERICAN SCHOOL SYSTEM

(Published in 2010)

"Ravitch's critique is an essential one—passionate, well considered and completely logical."

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What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy. All that society has accomplished for itself is put, through the agency of the school, at the disposal of its future members. All its better thoughts of itself it hopes to realize through the new possibilities [are] thus opened to its future self.

—JOHN DEWEY, 1907

The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people and be willing to bear the expenses of it. There should not be a district of one mile square, without a school in it, not founded by a charitable individual, but maintained at the public expense of the people themselves.

—JOHN ADAMS, 1785



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## Introduction

The purpose of this book is to answer four questions.

First, is American education in crisis?

Second, is American education failing and declining?

Third, what is the evidence for the reforms now being promoted by the federal government and adopted in many states?

Fourth, what should we do to improve our schools and the lives of children?

In this book, I show that the schools are in crisis because of persistent, orchestrated attacks on them and their teachers and principals, and attacks on the very principle of public responsibility for public education. These attacks create a false sense of crisis and serve the interests of those who want to privatize the public schools.

My last book sought to show that many of the policies promoted by the Bush administration, the Obama administration, and the nation's largest foundations had meager evidence to support them, and in some cases no evidence at all, and were likely to harm public education without improving the schools. In this book, I report additional evidence about the failure of the Bush-Obama "reforms."

In the spring of 2011, I decided to write this book as a result of a conversation with David Denby, who was writing an article about me that would eventually be published in *The New Yorker* magazine. At the time, we were riding in a car from New Jersey, where I had just given a lecture at the Education Law Center, to New York City, where we both live. Denby writes about American film and American culture, not education, so he came to the issues without any preconceptions. In addition to engaging in long discussions with me, following me to lectures, and reading my books, he interviewed critics of my work. He

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said to me, "Your critics say you are long on criticism but short on answers."

I said, "You have heard me lecture, and you know that is not true."

He suggested that I write a book to respond to the critics.

So I did, and this is that book.

I do not contend that the schools are fine just as they are. They are not. American education needs higher standards for those who enter the teaching profession. It needs higher standards for those who become principals and superintendents. It needs stronger and deeper curriculum in every subject. Schools need freedom from burdensome and intrusive regulations that undermine professional autonomy. They need the resources to meet the needs of the children they enroll. But they cannot improve if they are judged by flawed measures and continually at risk of closing because they do not meet an artificial goal created and imposed by legislators.

Schools need stability, adequate resources, well-prepared and experienced educators, community support, and a clear vision of what good education is. The purpose of elementary and secondary education is to develop the minds and character of young children and adolescents and help them grow up to become healthy, knowledgeable, and competent citizens.

I believe that privatizing our public schools is a risky and dangerous project. I believe it will hurt children, shatter communities, and damage our society. That is why I wrote this book.

# Reign of Error

## CHAPTER 1

# Our Schools Are at Risk

In the early years of the twenty-first century, a bipartisan consensus arose about educational policy in the United States. Right and left, Democrats and Republicans, the leading members of our political class and our media elite seemed to agree: Public education is broken. Our students are not learning enough. Public schools are bad and getting worse. We are being beaten by other nations with higher test scores. Our abysmal public schools threaten not only the performance of our economy but our national security, our very survival as a nation. This crisis is so profound that half measures and tweaks will not suffice. Schools must be closed and large numbers of teachers fired. Anyone who doubts this is unaware of the dimensions of the crisis or has a vested interest in defending the status quo.

Furthermore, according to this logic, now widely shared among policy makers and opinion shapers, blame must fall on the shoulders of teachers and principals. Where test scores are low, it is their fault. They should be held accountable for this educational catastrophe. They are responsible because they have become comfortable with the status quo of low expectations and low achievement, more interested in their pensions than in the children they teach.

In response to this crisis, the reformers have a ready path for solving it. Since teachers are the problem, their job protections must be eliminated and teachers must be fired. Teachers' unions must be opposed at every turn. The "hoops and hurdles" that limit entry into teaching must be eliminated. Teachers must be evaluated on the basis of their students' test scores. Public schools must be evaluated on an "objective" basis, and when they are failing, they must be closed. Students must be given choices other than traditional public schools, such as charter

schools, vouchers, and online schools.

In Hollywood films and television documentaries, the battle lines are clearly drawn. Traditional public schools are bad; their supporters are apologists for the unions. Those who advocate for charter schools, virtual schooling, and "school choice" are reformers; their supporters insist they are championing the rights of minorities. They say they are leaders of the civil rights movement of our day.

It is a compelling narrative, one that gives us easy villains and ready-made solutions. It appeals to values Americans have traditionally cherished—choice, freedom, optimism, and a latent distrust of government.

There is only one problem with this narrative.

It is wrong.

Public education is not broken. It is not failing or declining. The diagnosis is wrong, and the solutions of the corporate reformers are wrong. Our urban schools are in trouble because of concentrated poverty and racial segregation. But public education as such is not "broken." Public education is in a crisis only so far as society is and only so far as this new narrative of crisis has destabilized it. The solutions proposed by the self-proclaimed reformers have not worked as promised. They have failed even by their own most highly valued measure, which is test scores. At the same time, the reformers' solutions have had a destructive impact on education as a whole.

Far from being progressive, these changes strike at the heart of one of our nation's most valued institutions. Liberals, progressives, well-meaning people have lent their support to a project that is antithetical to liberalism and progressivism. By supporting market-based "reforms," they have allied themselves with those who seek to destroy public education. They are being used by those who have an implacable hostility toward the public sector. The transfer of public funds to private management and the creation of thousands of deregulated, unsupervised, and unaccountable schools have opened the public coffers to profiteering, fraud, and exploitation by large and small entrepreneurs.

As a historian of American education, I have seen, studied, and written about waves of school reforms that came and went. But what is happening now is an astonishing development. It is not meant to reform public education but is a deliberate effort to replace public education with a privately managed, free-market system of schooling. Public

education, established in America's towns and villages in the mid-nineteenth century, born of advocacy and struggle, is now in jeopardy. This essential institution, responsible for producing a democratic citizenry and tasked with providing equality of educational opportunity, is at risk. Under the cover of "choice" and "freedom," we may lose one of our society's greatest resources, our public school system—a system whose doors are open to all.

I was not always a critic of test-based accountability and choice. For many years, I too agreed that our public schools were in crisis. I wanted them to be far better. I worried about the content of the curriculum. I worried about low standards for students and for teachers. As a graduate of the public schools of Houston, I was an ambivalent supporter of school choice and certainly had no desire to replace public education with a voucherized, privately managed system of schools. In 1991–93, I served as assistant secretary of education in the administration of President George H. W. Bush, and I was in charge of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement. I was a strong supporter of standards, testing, and accountability. It was only after I saw the corrosive effects of No Child Left Behind that I reconsidered my long-held beliefs. In 2010, I published *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*. In that book, I recanted my earlier support for what is now known as the "reform" agenda in education: high-stakes testing, test-based accountability, competition, and school choice (charters and vouchers). When the book appeared, it was widely reviewed, hailed by most experienced educators, and predictably scorned by advocates of these policies.

Their most typical complaint was that while I was long on criticism, I offered no solutions. They, on the other hand, had solutions.

I contend that their solutions are not working. Some are demonstrably wrong. Some, like charter schools, have potential if the profit motive were removed, and if the concept were redesigned to meet the needs of the communities served rather than the plans of entrepreneurs. It is far better to stop and think than to plunge ahead vigorously, doing what is not only ineffective but wrong. We must always be open to trying new ideas in the schools, but we should try them first on a small scale and gather evidence before applying and mandating new ideas nationwide. When evidence is lacking, we should not move forward



with a sense of urgency. The reformers are putting the nation's children on a train that is headed for a cliff. This is the right time to stand on the tracks, wave a lantern, and say, "Wait, this won't work. Stop the train. Pick a different route." But the reformers say, "That's no solution. Full speed ahead," aiming right for the cliff.

What began as a movement for testing and accountability has turned into a privatization movement. President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind, with its unrealistic goals, has fed the privatization frenzy. The overreliance on and misuse of testing and data has created a sense of crisis, lending credibility to claims that American public education is failing and in decline. Yes, we have problems, but those problems are concentrated where poverty and racial segregation are concentrated. The reformers say they care about poverty, but they do not address it other than to insist upon private management of the schools in urban districts; the reformers ignore racial segregation altogether, apparently accepting it as inevitable. Thus, they leave the root causes of low academic performance undisturbed. What began as a movement to "save minority children from failing schools" and narrow the achievement gap by privatizing their schools has not accomplished that goal, but the movement is undaunted. It is now intent on advancing into middle-income districts in the cities and suburbs as well. This is already happening.

In this book, I will show why the reform agenda does not work, who is behind it, and how it is promoting the privatization of public education. I will then put forward my solutions, none of which is cheap or easy, none of which offers a quick fix to complicated problems. I have no silver bullets—because none exist—but I have proposals based on evidence and experience.

We know what works. What works are the very opportunities that advantaged families provide for their children. In homes with adequate resources, children get advantages that enable them to arrive in school healthy and ready to learn. Discerning, affluent parents demand schools with full curricula, experienced staffs, rich programs in the arts, libraries, well-maintained campuses, and small classes. As a society, we must do whatever is necessary to extend the same advantages to children who do not have them. Doing so will improve their ability to learn, enhance their chances for a good life, and strengthen our society.

So that readers don't have to wait until the later chapters of this

book, here is a summary of my solutions to improve both schools and society. Schools and society are intertwined. The supporting research comes later in the book. Every one of these solutions works to improve the lives and academic outcomes of young people.

Pregnant women should see a doctor early in their pregnancies and have regular care and good nutrition. Poor women who do not receive early and regular medical care are likely to have babies with developmental and cognitive problems.

Children need prekindergarten classes that teach them how to socialize with others, how to listen and learn, how to communicate well, and how to care for themselves, while engaging in the joyful pursuit of play and learning that is appropriate to their age and development and that builds their background knowledge and vocabulary.

Children in the early elementary grades need teachers who set age-appropriate goals. They should learn to read, write, calculate, and explore nature, and they should have plenty of time to sing and dance and draw and play and giggle. Classes in these grades should be small enough—ideally fewer than twenty—so that students get the individual attention they need. Testing in the early grades should be used sparingly, not to rank students, but diagnostically, to help determine what they know and what they still need to learn. Test scores should remain a private matter between parents and teachers, not shared with the district or the state for any individual student. The district or state may aggregate scores for entire schools but should not judge teachers or schools on the basis of these scores.

As students enter the upper elementary grades and middle school and high school, they should have a balanced curriculum that includes not only reading, writing, and mathematics but the sciences, literature, history, geography, civics, and foreign languages. Their school should have a rich arts program, where students learn to sing, dance, play an instrument, join an orchestra or a band, perform in a play, sculpt, or use technology to design structures, conduct research, or create artworks. Every student should have time for physical education every day. Every school should have a library with librarians and media specialists. Every school should have a nurse, a psychologist, a guidance counselor, and a social worker. And every school should have after-school programs where students may explore their interests, whether in athletics, chess, robotics, history club, dramatics, science club, nature study, Scouting,

or other activities. Teachers should write their own tests and use standardized tests only for diagnostic purposes. Classes should be small enough to ensure that every teacher knows his or her students and can provide the sort of feedback to strengthen their ability to write, their noncognitive skills, their critical thinking, and their mathematical and scientific acumen.

Our society should commit to building a strong education profession. Public policy should aim to raise the standards for entry into teaching. Teachers should be well-educated and well-prepared for their profession. Principals and superintendents should be experienced educators.

Schools should have the resources they need for the students they enroll.

As a society, we must establish goals, strategies, and programs to reduce poverty and racial segregation. Only by eliminating opportunity gaps can we eliminate achievement gaps. Poor and immigrant children need the same sorts of schools that wealthy children have, only more so. Those who start life with the fewest advantages need even smaller classes, even more art, science, and music to engage them, to spark their creativity, and to fulfill their potential.

There is a solid research base for my recommendations. If you want a society organized to promote the survival of the fittest and the triumph of the most advantaged, then you will prefer the current course of action, where children and teachers and schools are "racing to the top." But if you believe the goal of our society should be equality of opportunity for all children and that we should seek to reduce the alarming inequalities children now experience, then my program should win your support.

My premise is straightforward: you can't do the right things until you stop doing the wrong things. If you insist on driving that train right over the cliff, you will never reach your hoped-for destination of excellence for all. Instead, you will inflict harm on millions of children and reduce the quality of their educations. You will squander billions of dollars on failed schemes that should have been spent on realistic, evidence-based ways of improving our public schools, our society, and the lives of children.

Stop doing the wrong things. Stop promoting competition and

choice as answers to the very inequality that was created by competition and choice. Stop the mindless attacks on the education profession. A good society requires both a vibrant private sector and a responsible public sector. We must not permit the public sector to be privatized and eviscerated. In a democracy, important social goals require social collaboration. We must work to establish programs that improve the lives of children and families. To build a strong educational system, we need to build a strong and respected education profession. The federal government and states must develop policies to recruit, support, and retain career educators, both in the classroom and in positions of leadership. If we mean to conquer educational inequity, we must recognize that the root causes of poor academic performance are segregation and poverty, along with inequitably resourced schools. We must act decisively to reduce the causes of inequity. We know what good schools look like, we know what great education consists of. We must bring good schools to every district and neighborhood in our nation. Public education is a basic public responsibility: we must not be persuaded by a false crisis narrative to privatize it. It is time for parents, educators, and other concerned citizens to join together to strengthen our public schools and preserve them for future generations. The future of our democracy depends on it.

## CHAPTER 2

# The Context for Corporate Reform

Federal law and policy turned the education reform movement of the twenty-first century into a powerful force that no school or district dared to ignore.

Since the publication in 1983 of a report called *A Nation at Risk*, federal and state policy makers have searched for policy levers with which to raise academic performance. That report was the product of a commission—called the National Commission on Excellence in Education—appointed by Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell, during the administration of President Ronald Reagan. The commission warned that the nation was endangered by “a rising tide of mediocrity” in the schools; it pointed to the poor standing of American students on international tests, a recurring phenomenon since the first international test was offered in the mid-1960s. Its basic claim was that the American standard of living was threatened by the loss of major manufacturing industries—such as automobiles, machine tools, and steel mills—to other nations, which the commission attributed to the mediocre quality of our public educational system; this claim shifted the blame from shortsighted corporate leadership to the public schools. The commission called for better curriculum standards, higher graduation requirements, better teacher training, higher teacher pay, and other customary improvements. The commission said very little about testing, accountability, and choice.

The first Bush administration, in which I served, had little appetite for an expanded federal role in education. It announced a program called America 2000, which relied mainly on voluntarism since a Democratic Congress would not consider any education bills sponsored by President George H. W. Bush. Congressional Democrats in the early

1990s wanted greater resources and greater equity in public schools, not standards and tests. The Clinton administration liked the idea of national standards and national testing, but when Republicans took control of Congress in 1995, that idea died. The administration settled for a program called Goals 2000, which offered money to states to set their own standards and tests.

Along came the George W. Bush administration in 2001, which proposed sweeping federal legislation called No Child Left Behind (NCLB). On the campaign trail, Bush spoke of "the Texas miracle," claiming that testing and accountability had led to startling improvements in student performance. He said that test scores and graduation rates were up, and the achievement gap was narrowing, thanks to the Texas reforms. We now know that there was no such miracle; Texas made some increases on federal tests, like many other states, but its students register at the national average, nowhere near the top. In 2001, no one listened to those who warned that the "Texas miracle" was an illusion.<sup>1</sup> Congress swiftly passed the law, which dramatically changed the federal role in education.

The law declared that all states must test every child annually in grades 3 through 8 in reading and mathematics and report test scores by race, ethnicity, low-income status, disability status, and limited-English proficiency. By the year 2014, all students were supposed to achieve proficiency on state tests. The states were required to monitor every school to see if every group was on track to reach proficiency. Any school that persistently failed to meet its annual target would be labeled a school in need of improvement (in the eyes of the media and thus the public, that means a "failing" school). With each year that the school failed to meet its target, the sanctions became increasingly more punitive. Eventually, if the school kept failing, it was at risk of having its staff fired or having the school closed, handed over to state control or private management, or turned into a charter school or "any other major restructuring." Many schools "failed" year after year, and as 2014 approached, the majority of public schools in the nation had been declared failures, including some excellent, highly regarded schools (typically, the group that was not making sufficient progress toward 100 percent proficiency was students with disabilities, and the schools that were likeliest to be labeled as failing enrolled high proportions of poor and minority students). In Massachusetts, for example, the state

with the nation's highest-performing students as judged by federal tests, 80 percent of the state's public schools were "failing" by NCLB standards in 2012.

Let's be clear: 100 percent proficiency is an impossible goal; no nation in the world has ever achieved this, nor has any other nation ever passed legislation to punish its schools for not reaching an unattainable goal. It was as though Congress had passed a law saying that every city in America should be crime-free. Who could disapprove of such a laudable goal? What city would not want to be crime-free? But imagine if the law set a deadline twelve years off and said that any city that did not meet the goal would be punished; its police stations would be closed and privatized; its police officers would lose their badges. The first to close would be the police stations in the poorest neighborhoods, where crime rates were highest. Eventually, the scythe would swing even in affluent neighborhoods, because no city is completely crime-free. Wishing that it might be so, or passing laws to require that it be so, does not make it so.

NCLB opened the door to huge entrepreneurial opportunities. Federal funds were set aside for after-school tutoring, and thousands of tutoring companies sprang up overnight to claim a share. Many new ventures opened to advise schools on how to meet NCLB testing targets, how to analyze NCLB data, how to "turn around" failing schools, and how to meet other goals embedded in the legislation.

NCLB encouraged the growth of the charter sector by proposing that charter schools were a remedy for failing public schools. When NCLB was passed, charters were a new and untested idea. The original idea for charters was first suggested in 1988, not to promote competition, but to allow teachers to try out new ideas. One of its originators, Ray Budde, was a professor at the University of Massachusetts who envisioned charters run by teachers, free to teach without interference by the local district bureaucracy. The other originator was Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, who envisioned charters where teachers sought out the lowest-performing students, the dropouts, and the disengaged, then figured out innovative ways to ignite their interest in education. Both these men, unknown to each other, saw charters as schools empowered to devise innovative practices and ready to collaborate and share what they had learned with their colleagues and existing schools. Certainly, neither imagined a charter sector that was nearly 90

percent non-union or one that in some states presented profit-making opportunities for entrepreneurs.

Minnesota passed the first charter law in 1991, and the first charter school opened in 1992. Only nine years later, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind law, recommending conversion of a low-performing school to a charter as a remedy. At the time, there was no evidence that charters would succeed where the local public school had failed. Nonetheless, the congressional endorsement was valuable publicity for charters, which gained public recognition and new opportunities to expand and compete with neighborhood public schools for higher test scores. In addition, it paved the way for federal appropriations and federal tax breaks for charter school construction.

As 2014 neared, states were spending hundreds of millions of dollars each year on testing and on test preparation materials; the schools in some districts and states were allocating 20 percent of the school year to preparing for state tests. This misallocation of scarce resources was hardly surprising, because schools lived or died depending on their test scores. Educators and parents raised their voices against the incessant testing, but no one seemed to know how to stop it. Some states not only tested children in grades 3 through 8, as NCLB required, but started testing children in the early grades and in prekindergarten to ready them for the testing that began in the third grade. And the number of tests administered to high school students increased as well, both as a measure of progress and as a condition for graduation. Texas, the epicenter of the testing fetish, insisted that students needed to pass fifteen different tests to get a high school diploma.

The thirst for data became unquenchable. Policy makers in Washington and the state capitals apparently assumed that more testing would produce more learning. They were certain that they needed accountability and could not imagine any way to hold schools "accountable" without test scores. This unnatural focus on testing produced perverse but predictable results: it narrowed the curriculum; many districts scaled back time for the arts, history, civics, physical education, science, foreign language, and whatever was not tested. Cheating scandals occurred in Atlanta, Washington, D.C., and other districts. States like New York manipulated the passing score on state tests to inflate the results and bring them closer to Washington's unrealistic goal. Teaching to the test, once considered unprofessional and unethical, became



common practice in the age of NCLB. Districts invested many millions of dollars in test preparation materials to help teachers do it better. Under pressure to get higher scores to save their jobs and their schools, teachers drilled students in how to take tests and taught them the types of questions that had been used on previous tests and were likely to appear again.

NCLB remained on the books year after year, long after it was due to be revised, reauthorized, or scrapped in 2007. Congress was deadlocked and unable to escape a trap of its own devising. No one seemed able to imagine a federal education policy that did not rely on testing, that did not demand measures to hold schools "accountable" for failure to produce quantifiable results. No one seemed to remember that this had not been the federal role before 2002, when NCLB was signed into law. Even though the "Texas miracle" was long ago forgotten, the federal law that mimicked the Texas model remained in force.

With the election of Barack Obama in 2008, many educators expected a change in federal education policy. Their hopes were dashed, however, by Obama's education policies, specifically his Race to the Top competition. At the beginning of the new president's term, Congress passed economic stimulus funding in response to the financial collapse of 2008. Congress set aside \$100 billion for education. Of the total, \$95 billion was allocated to keep teachers employed, to offset the shrinkage of state and local budgets. The remaining \$5 billion was used to fund a competition among the states, called Race to the Top. Secretary Arne Duncan set the conditions. To be eligible, states had to agree to adopt new common standards and tests (the Common Core State Standards); expand the number of charter schools; evaluate the effectiveness of teachers in significant part by the test scores of their students (and remove any statutory barriers to doing so); and agree to "turn around" their lowest-performing schools by taking such dramatic steps as firing staff and closing the schools.

Eleven states and the District of Columbia won Race to the Top funding. Dozens of states competed for the funds, all of them accepting the premises of the competition so they could be eligible to win the millions of federal dollars at a time of deep fiscal distress. By dangling the chance to win millions of dollars before hard-pressed states, the Obama administration leveraged changes across the nation in state education policy, aligning it with the policy preferences of Race to the

Top. Among the premises of Race to the Top was that charter schools and school choice were necessary reforms; that standardized testing was the best way to measure the progress of students and the quality of their teachers, principals, and schools; and that competition among schools would improve them. It also gave a bipartisan stamp of approval to the idea that a low-performing school could be improved by firing the staff, closing the school, and starting over with a new name and a new staff.

All of these ideas were highly contested; not one has a strong body of evidence or research to support it or to justify the imposition of so many different and untested changes at the same time. But with the joint imprimatur of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, advocates of standardized testing, school choice, merit pay, and tough accountability measures like school closings heralded these measures as "reforms." Race to the Top was only marginally different from No Child Left Behind. In fact, it was worse, because it gave full-throated Democratic endorsement to the long-standing Republican agenda of testing, accountability, and choice.

Race to the Top abandoned equity as the driving principle of federal aid. From the initiation of federal aid to local school districts in 1965, Democratic administrations had insisted on formula grants, which distributed federal money to schools and districts based on the proportion of students who were poor, not on a competition among states. The Obama administration shifted gears and took the position that competition was a better way to award federal funding. This change worked in favor of advantaged states and districts that could hire professional grant writers to compete for federal funding. In many cases, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation gave grants to hire professionals to develop applications for specific states, which tilted the field toward the applicants favored by Gates. By picking a few winners, the Race to the Top competition abandoned the traditional idea of equality of educational opportunity, where federal aid favored districts and schools that enrolled students with the highest needs.

The new billions of federal funding encouraged entrepreneurs to enter the education market. Almost overnight, consultants and vendors offered their services to advise districts and states on how to design teacher evaluation systems, how to train teachers, how to train principals, how to turn around failing schools, how to use new technologies, how to engage in data-driven decision making, on and on. With the

adoption of the Common Core standards by almost every state, education publishers hurried to align their products with the new standards, entrepreneurs began developing technology to support the Common Core standards, and even more consultants hung out their shingles to sell their services to districts and states about how to implement the Common Core and how to engage in data collection, data management, and data analysis. *The Denver Post* determined that 35 percent of the federal funds allocated to that city in a School Improvement Grant was spent for consultants, not for students or teachers or schools.<sup>2</sup>

The U.S. Department of Education awarded \$350 million to two consortia to develop national assessments to measure the new national standards. States and districts will have to make large investments in technology, because the new national assessments will be delivered online. By some estimates, the states will be required to spend as much as \$16 billion to implement the Common Core standards. Unfortunately, neither the Obama administration nor the developers of the Common Core standards thought it necessary to field-test the new standards. They have no idea whether the adoption of the new standards and tests will improve education or how they will affect students who are now performing poorly. State education departments warned that the enhanced rigor of the Common Core would cause test scores to plummet by as much as 30 percent, even in successful districts. Should this occur, the sharp decline in passing rates will enhance the reformers' claims about our nation's "broken" education system. This, in turn, will create a burgeoning market for new products and technologies. Some reformers hoped that the poor results of the new tests would persuade even suburban parents to lose faith in their community schools and demand not only new products but school closings, charters, and vouchers.<sup>3</sup>

This burst of entrepreneurial activity was planned. Joanne Weiss, Secretary Duncan's chief of staff, formerly the director of Duncan's Race to the Top competition, wrote an article in which she described the imperative to match entrepreneurs with school systems. Weiss had previously been the chief operating officer at the NewSchools Venture Fund, which invests in new charter schools and new technology ventures. Race to the Top, she wrote, was designed to scale up entrepreneurial activity, to encourage the creation of new markets for both for-profit and nonprofit investors. The new standards were a linchpin

to match "smart capital" to educational innovation:

The development of common standards and shared assessments radically alters the market for innovation in curriculum development, professional development, and formative assessments. Previously, these markets operated on a state-by-state basis, and often on a district-by-district basis. But the adoption of common standards and shared assessments means that education entrepreneurs will enjoy national markets where the best products can be taken to scale.<sup>4</sup>

And indeed the investment opportunities seemed to grow by leaps and bounds after the Obama administration launched its Race to the Top. There were not only high-priced consultants and experts to assist in complying with new federal demands but additional ways to invest in new technologies and the growth industry of charter schools. Equity investors held conferences to discuss the expanded opportunities for making a profit in the public education sector.<sup>5</sup> The tennis star Andre Agassi formed a partnership with an equity investing firm to raise \$750 million in capital to build at least seventy-five charter schools for forty thousand or more students. This was not philanthropy; it was a profit-making venture.<sup>6</sup> Investors quickly figured out that there was money to be made in the purchase, leasing, and rental of space to charter schools, and an aggressive for-profit charter sector emerged wherever it was permitted by state law; in states where for-profit charters were not allowed, nonprofit charters hired for-profit operators to run their schools. Technology companies competed to develop new applications for the new Common Core State Standards, and there appeared to be many exciting opportunities to make money in the emerging education marketplace.<sup>7</sup> This was the first time in history that the U.S. Department of Education designed programs with the intent of stimulating private sector investors to create for-profit ventures in American education.

The combination of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top redefined the meaning of education reform. In this new environment, education reformers support testing, accountability, and choice. Education reformers rely on data derived from standardized testing. Education reformers insist that all children be proficient (NCLB) or increase their test scores every year (Race to the Top) or their schools and teachers are failures. Education reformers accept "no excuses." Education

reformers believe that schools improve if they are forced to compete. Education reformers believe that teachers will produce higher test scores if they are "incentivized" by merit pay. Education reformers use testing data to fire principals and teachers and to close schools. Education reformers applaud private management of public schools. Education reformers support the proliferation of for-profit organizations into school management. Education reformers don't care about teacher credentials or experience, because some economists say they don't raise test scores. Education reformers in the early twenty-first century believe that school quality and teacher quality may best be measured by test scores.

Once upon a time, education reformers thought deeply about the relationship between school and society. They thought about child development as the starting point for education. In those days, education reformers recognized the important role of the family in the education of children. Many years ago, education reformers demanded desegregation. They debated how to improve curriculum and instruction and what the content of the curriculum should be.

But that was long ago. Those concerns were no longer *au courant*. Now there was bipartisan consensus around the new definition of education reform. Those who held the levers of power at the U.S. Department of Education, in the big foundations, on Wall Street, and in the major corporations agreed on how to reform American education. The debates about the role of schooling in a democratic society, the lives of children and families, and the relationship between schools and society were relegated to the margins as no longer relevant to the business plan to reinvent American education.

## CHAPTER 3

# Who Are the Corporate Reformers?

The education reform movement must be defined in terms of its ideology, its strategies, and its leading members.

The “reformers” say they want excellent education for all; they want great teachers; they want to “close the achievement gap”; they want innovation and effectiveness; they want the best of everything for everyone. They pursue these universally admired goals by privatizing education, lowering the qualifications for future teachers, replacing teachers with technology, increasing class sizes, endorsing for-profit organizations to manage schools, using carrots and sticks to motivate teachers, and elevating standardized test scores as the ultimate measure of education quality.

“Reform” is really a misnomer, because the advocates for this cause seek not to reform public education but to transform it into an entrepreneurial sector of the economy. The groups and individuals that constitute today’s reform movement have appropriated the word “reform” because it has such positive connotations in American political discourse and American history. But the roots of this so-called reform movement may be traced to a radical ideology with a fundamental distrust of public education and hostility to the public sector in general.

The “reform” movement is really a “corporate reform” movement, funded to a large degree by major foundations, Wall Street hedge fund managers, entrepreneurs, and the U.S. Department of Education. The movement is determined to cut costs and maximize competition among schools and among teachers. It seeks to eliminate the geographically based system of public education as we have known it for the past 150 years and replace it with a competitive market-based system of school choice—one that includes traditional public schools, privately

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managed charter schools, religious schools, voucher schools, for-profit schools, virtual schools, and for-profit vendors of instruction. Lacking any geographic boundaries, these schools would compete for customers. The customers would choose to send their children and their public funding wherever they wish, based on personal preference or on information such as the schools' test scores and a letter grade conferred by the state (based largely on test scores).

Some in the reform movement, believing that American education is obsolete and failing, think they are promoting a necessary but painful redesign of the nation's ailing schools. Some sincerely believe they are helping poor black and brown children escape from failing public schools. Some think they are on the side of modernization and innovation. But others see an opportunity to make money in a large, risk-free, government-funded sector or an opportunity for personal advancement and power. Some—a small but important number—believe they are acting rationally by treating the public education sector as an investment opportunity.

The corporate reform movement has its roots in an ideology that is antagonistic to public education. Partisans on the far right long ago turned against public schools, which they call "government schools." As a matter of ideology, they do not believe that government can do anything right. From the time that the University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman introduced the idea of vouchers in 1955, his supporters embraced vouchers as the best school reform ever, because it would enable parents to take government money to a school of their choice, including private and religious schools. Voucher advocates have long argued that the money should follow the child to whatever institution the family chooses, be it public, private, or religious. For years, they made the seductive pitch that parents should be "free to choose" (as Friedman put it) and that government should supply each family its share of the money and get out of the way. For many years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954, the idea of school choice was tainted because segregationists used it to evade desegregation in districts facing court-ordered desegregation.

President Ronald Reagan, an admirer of Milton Friedman's, supported vouchers but was never able to persuade Congress to go along. In state referenda, the public has consistently opposed vouchers. Every time vouchers were put to a public vote, they were defeated by large

margins. As recently as 2012, voters in Florida decisively rejected a constitutional amendment to permit vouchers. Voucher proponents complain that the public doesn't understand its own best interest and is misled by teachers' unions, who are just protecting their jobs and power. The election results in state after state show that the public does not want to subsidize religious schools with its tax dollars. Voucher advocates do not accept that the public likes and supports its community public schools, free from any religious teachings, with doors open to all. So choice supporters continually parrot or manufacture a steady stream of bad news about public education to shake the public's faith in public schools. However, even when polls show that people have a low opinion of American education, they nonetheless continue to have a high opinion of their own neighborhood schools.

Today's reformers assert that "the money should follow the child," and they herald this as a bold new reform idea. But it is not new. It is the same idea that was behind vouchers more than half a century ago. Today, the same arguments are made by Governor Bobby Jindal in Louisiana, who wants the money to follow the child to any school (even schools that teach creationism as science), any online corporation, any for-profit vendor of educational services, regardless of experience, quality, or qualifications. As public money is dispersed, so is public oversight and accountability for the spending of public money. Governor Rick Snyder of Michigan, eager to dismantle public education, proposed a formula for education funding based on this principle: "Any time, any place, any way, any pace." Conservative governors in other states make the same arguments.<sup>1</sup> But there is nothing conservative about replacing a beloved and traditional community institution—the public school—with a marketplace of privately run schools and for-profit vendors. This is a radical project, not conservative at all.

The organizations that advocate for "reform" have names that are appealing and innocuous, like the American Federation for Children, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), Better Education for Kids (B4K), Black Alliance for Educational Options, the education program at the Brookings Institution, the Center for Education Reform, Chiefs for Change, ConnCAN (and its spin-off, 50CAN, as well as state-specific groups like MinnCAN, NYCAN, and RI-CAN), Democrats for Education Reform, the Education Equality Project, Education Reform Now, Educators 4 Excellence, EdVoice, the Foundation



for Excellence in Education, the National Council on Teacher Quality, New Leaders for New Schools, NewSchools Venture Fund, Parent Revolution, Stand for Children, Students for Education Reform, StudentsFirst, Teach for America, Teach Plus, and a host of others. Many of these groups have overlapping membership on their boards and are funded by the same foundations. They exist in a giant echo chamber, listening and talking only to one another, dismissing the concerns of parents, teachers, and communities.

The reformers are Republicans and Democrats. They include not only far-right Republican governors but some Democratic governors as well. They include President Barack Obama and Secretary Arne Duncan, as well as Democratic mayors in such cities as Newark, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Elected officials of both parties have signed on to an agenda that threatens the future of public education.

The aims of the corporate reform movement are supported by a broad array of think tanks, some purportedly liberal, some centrist, some on the right, and some on the far right. These include the American Enterprise Institute, the Center for American Progress, the Center on Reinventing Public Education, Education Sector, Education Trust, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, the Goldwater Institute, the Heartland Institute, the Koret Task Force at the Hoover Institution, and Policy Innovators in Education Network, as well as a bevy of state-level public policy think tanks that support privatization. Many of these think tanks—both liberal and conservative—work closely together, co-sponsoring conferences and publications to advance their shared agenda. Major foundations handsomely fund the think tanks that promote the corporate reform ideology.

The corporate reform movement has co-opted progressive themes and language in the service of radical purposes. Advocating the privatization of public education is deeply reactionary. Disabling or eliminating teachers' unions removes the strongest voice in each state to advocate for public education and to fight crippling budget cuts. In every state, classroom teachers are experts in education; they know what their students need, and their collective voice should be part of any public decision about school improvement. Stripping teachers of their job protections limits academic freedom. Evaluating teachers by the test scores of their students undermines professionalism and encourages teaching

to the test. Claiming to be in the forefront of a civil rights movement while ignoring poverty and segregation is reactionary and duplicitous.

The leading funders of the reform movement are the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which supports charter schools and test-based teacher evaluation; the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, which supports charter schools and trains urban superintendents in its managerial philosophy; and the Walton Family Foundation, which funds vouchers and charters. These powerful and wealthy foundations have overlapping interests. They subsidize many organizations in common, such as Teach for America (which recruits young college graduates to teach for two years in low-income schools), the KIPP charter schools, and Parent Revolution (the chief advocates of the "parent trigger" idea). They jointly funded the digital learning policy statement issued by Jeb Bush, former governor of Florida, and Bob Wise, former governor of West Virginia, which promotes the proliferation of low-quality virtual charter schools. Many other wealthy foundations support the corporate reform agenda, including the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, the Bradley Foundation, the Robertson Foundation, the Fisher Foundation, and the Anschutz Foundation, as well as fabulously rich individuals, including the Bezos family (Amazon.com), Reed Hastings (Netflix), and Rupert Murdoch (News Corporation).

The Gates Foundation is by far the largest foundation in the United States and possibly the world. It awards hundreds of millions of dollars in education grants every year. In addition to underwriting the expansion of charter schools, it invests heavily in test-based evaluation of teachers and merit pay. It has made grants to the biggest teachers' unions, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, and also made grants to start groups of young teachers to challenge the teachers' unions. It is difficult to find education organizations that have not been funded by the Gates Foundation. It underwrites "advocacy," by subsidizing almost every major think tank in Washington, D.C. It supported the creation, evaluation, and promotion of the Common Core State Standards, which have been adopted in almost every state. In addition, the Gates Foundation has joined in a partnership with the British publisher Pearson to develop online curriculum for teaching the Common Core standards. And the Gates Foundation underwrote the creation of a large database project to col-

lect confidential student data with Wireless Generation, a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation; critics fear that this information will be disclosed to vendors to market new products to schools and students.<sup>2</sup>

The corporate reform movement has a well-honed message: We are the reformers. We have solutions. The public schools are failing. The public schools are in decline. The public schools don't work. The public schools are obsolete and broken. We want to innovate. We know how to fix schools. We know how to close the achievement gap. We are leading the civil rights movement of our era. We want a great teacher in every classroom. Class size doesn't matter. Teachers should be paid more if their students get higher scores. They should be fired if their students don't get higher scores. Teachers should have their seniority and tenure stripped from them because those things protect bad teachers. Bad teachers cause the achievement gap. Great teachers close the achievement gap. Teachers' unions are greedy and don't care about children. People who draw attention to poverty are just making excuses for bad teachers and failing public schools. Those who don't agree with our strategies are defenders of the status quo. They have no solutions. We have solutions. We know what works. Testing works. Accountability works. Privately managed charter schools work. Closing schools with low test scores works. Paying bonuses to teachers to get higher scores works. Online instruction works. Replacing teachers with online instruction not only works but cuts costs while providing profits to edu-entrepreneurs who will spur further innovation.

It is a seductive message because it offers hope that someone knows how to fix difficult problems. They claim they not only know how to do it but *are* doing it. They express their message with clarity and certainty. Their message resonates with the major media and with the most powerful people in our society: billionaires, corporate executives, the leaders of major foundations, the president of the United States, the U.S. secretary of education, Wall Street hedge fund managers, pundits, and think tank opinion makers.

The corporate reformers don't like local school boards, because they sometimes defer to the views of teachers and they squabble too much; school boards, they say, slow down decision making with public hearings, and sometimes they make the wrong decisions. That is always a risk in a democracy; deliberative bodies are slow and sometimes make

mistakes.

Corporate reformers want education decisions in the hands of a powerful executive who is immune to public opinion. They like the idea of a governor who appoints a commission to override the decisions of local school boards that resist charter schools. They like the idea of a superintendent at the state level who has unlimited power to impose his (their) policies, especially closing public schools and opening charter schools. In urban districts, their preferred mode of governance is a mayor or superintendent who controls the schools and answers to no one. At the school level, they want principals who can hire and fire at will, without due process. Corporate reformers don't like checks and balances. They want executives who can ignore the protests of parents, students, teachers, and community leaders, no matter how loudly they complain and no matter how many show up at public hearings or protest at rallies.

It pays to be on the reform team, certainly much more than it does to be a public school teacher. When Chicago's teachers went on strike in September 2012, the national media thought it shocking that the average Chicago teacher was paid \$75,000 a year; they ignored the fact that Chicago teachers are compelled by law to live in Chicago and that this is not an outrageous salary for an educated, experienced professional who lives in a major city. Yet the media are indifferent when charter executives receive salaries of \$300,000, \$400,000, \$500,000, to oversee a single school or a chain of small schools. The reformers are flush with cash from foundations and corporations. The Walton Family Foundation alone made school-reform grants of \$159 million in 2011. Reformers often complain about the power and influence of the teachers' unions, but the unions cannot match the resources of the Gates Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation, as well as the many other foundations that march in lockstep with them, plus individual billionaires and millionaires who support candidates for state and local school board races. (The Gates and Walton foundations alone spend more than \$500 million annually on education projects, which is more than ten times what unions spend to support civil rights groups and other allies.) When you combine the wealth of the big foundations with the financial and political clout of the U.S. Department of Education, they are a mighty force.<sup>3</sup>

For an ambitious person, being part of the corporate reform movement offers not only access to money but an accelerated route to profes-

sional success. Graduates of the Broad Superintendents Academy, an unaccredited program created by the Broad Foundation to teach Eli Broad's management style of corporate reform, are on a fast track to become superintendents of urban districts—and the Broad Foundation may enhance their salaries. Some of the graduates of this short-term program are now state superintendents. Many are in charge of urban districts.

The young person who joins up with Teach for America or one of the big charter chains becomes part of a powerful network. These organizations provide an escalator to the top that no ordinary teaching career can match. Teachers without these connections may work for years in their classrooms before they are even considered for department chair or assistant principal. Those who rise in the corporate reform movement are quickly managing their own charter schools or assuming leadership roles in large urban districts or state education departments, some before they reach the age of thirty.

Wall Street hedge fund managers have their own organization, called Democrats for Education Reform (DFER). DFER raises money for candidates and elected officials whom it likes, and it doesn't like them unless they agree to the corporate reform agenda, especially the expansion of charter schools and the imposition of teacher evaluation systems based on test scores (though not for teachers in the charter schools it supports). At the inaugural meeting of DFER in 2005, the speaker for the event was the promising young senator from Illinois, Barack Obama. When Obama ran for president in 2008, his chief education spokesperson was Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University. But when Obama was elected, he chose Arne Duncan as secretary. Duncan not only was his friend but was recommended by DFER.<sup>4</sup>

Arne Duncan, the secretary of education in the Obama administration, is one of the recognized leaders of the corporate reform movement who implemented many of its ideas when he was superintendent of schools in Chicago. Jeb Bush, former governor of Florida, is another national leader. He created an organization called the Foundation for Excellence in Education, which actively promotes vouchers, charter schools, for-profit charter schools, virtual learning, and for-profit online corporations, as well as testing and accountability tied to test scores. In states with a Republican governor and a Republican supermajority in the legislature, the measures to privatize education advanced rapidly. In

Michigan, Governor Rick Snyder promoted legislation to allow emergency managers to take over fiscally troubled districts; in two small school districts, the emergency managers closed the public schools and gave the students to a for-profit charter school chain (the law was repealed in 2012 by Michigan voters, but Snyder left the emergency managers and their decisions in place). Governor Mitch Daniels and the Indiana legislature authorized vouchers, for-profit charter schools, for-profit cyber-charters, and a test-based teacher accountability system. Governor Bobby Jindal of Louisiana pushed through sweeping legislation in 2012 that offered vouchers to more than half the students in the state and authorized the opening of many new charter schools; in addition, students will be able to take their state money and spend it in almost any place that calls itself a vendor of educational services. All of the money to support the alternatives to public education is taken out of the budget for public schools. The Louisiana reform legislation ties teachers' evaluations to the test scores of their students, but teachers in charter schools and voucher schools do not need to be certified or subject to the same requirements, as is the case in many other states and districts.

When the Louisiana legislation was hurriedly passed, it was hailed by a group of state superintendents called Chiefs for Change as "student-centered reforms" that "will completely transform Louisiana and its students."<sup>5</sup> Chiefs for Change is affiliated with Jeb Bush's Foundation for Excellence in Education. It describes itself as a coalition of state leaders who share a "zeal for education reform." Its members include the state superintendents in Rhode Island, Indiana, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Florida, Maine, New Jersey, and New Mexico.

Much of the legislation for the education reform movement in states with conservative governors or legislatures comes from a shadowy group called ALEC (the American Legislative Exchange Council). ALEC stayed out of the public eye until 2012, when a shooting in Florida brought it unwanted national attention. A black teenager named Trayvon Martin was killed by a man who said he was defending himself in accordance with Florida's "stand your ground" law, which was based on model legislation written by ALEC. ALEC was founded in 1973 to advance privatization and free-market principles. Its membership includes some two thousand state legislators. Funded by scores of major corporations and philanthropists, ALEC writes model

legislation, which its members bring to their state legislatures. Many states have adopted ALEC model laws, simply inserting the name of the state into the proposed legislative language. ALEC does not like public schools or unions. ALEC likes vouchers and charter schools. It wants to eliminate tenure and seniority from teachers and encourage paths into teaching that don't involve getting a license or pedagogical training. ALEC likes for-profit schools, especially cyber-charters. It promotes "parent trigger" laws to enable privatizers to convince parents to sign petitions that will turn their schools over to charter managers.<sup>6</sup>

The most unexpected supporter of corporate reform was President Barack Obama. Educators enthusiastically supported Obama, expecting that he would eliminate the noxious policies of President Bush's No Child Left Behind. They assumed, given his history as a community organizer and his sympathy for society's least fortunate, that his administration would adopt policies that responded to the needs of children, rather than concentrating on testing and accountability.

The first big surprise for educators occurred when President Obama abandoned Linda Darling-Hammond and selected Arne Duncan, who had run the low-performing schools of Chicago, as secretary of education. The second big surprise—shock, actually—happened when the Obama administration released the details of Race to the Top, its major initiative, which was designed in Secretary Duncan's office with the help of consultants from the Gates Foundation, the Broad Foundation, and other advocates of high-stakes testing and charter schools.

There was very little difference between Race to the Top and NCLB. The Obama program preserved testing, accountability, and choice at the center of the federal agenda. Race to the Top was even more punitive than NCLB. It insisted that states evaluate teachers in relation to the test scores of their students, which made standardized testing even more important than it was under NCLB. It encouraged states to authorize more privately managed charter schools, an initiative that President George W. Bush would never have been able to get through a Democratic-controlled Congress. It endorsed competition and choice, which were traditional themes of the Republican Party. The very concept of a "race to the top" repudiates the traditional Democratic Party commitment to equity; it suggests that the winner will "race to the

top,” leaving the losers far behind. But a commitment to equity means that federal resources should be allocated based on need, not on a competition between the swift and the slow.

Because Race to the Top was handsomely funded, states eagerly competed for a share of its \$5 billion. President Obama spoke out of both sides of his mouth about this signature program. He said in his State of the Union address in 2011 that Race to the Top was not a top-down mandate (after all, states had volunteered to accept its mandates) but “the work of local teachers and principals; school boards and communities” (which was not true in any sense).

Even though Race to the Top made standardized testing more important than ever, President Obama spoke out against testing. In 2011, he said he was strongly opposed to teaching to the test. He said,

One thing I never want to see happen is schools that are just teaching to the test. Because then you're not learning about the world; you're not learning about different cultures, you're not learning about science, you're not learning about math. All you're learning about is how to fill out a little bubble on an exam and the little tricks that you need to do in order to take a test. And that's not going to make education interesting to you. And young people do well in stuff that they're interested in. They're not going to do as well if it's boring.

His critics agreed with him. The California teacher and blogger Anthony Cody wondered if the president knew that Race to the Top required states to tie teacher evaluations to test scores, that Secretary Duncan wanted to evaluate teacher preparation programs by the test scores of the students of the teachers they produced, and that Obama's Department of Education “is proposing greatly expanding both the number of subjects tested, and the frequency of tests, to enable us to measure the ‘value’ each teacher adds to their students.” At the same time that the president was lamenting “teaching to the test,” his own policies made it necessary to teach to the test or be fired.<sup>7</sup>

In his 2012 State of the Union, the president's message was even more inconsistent. He said that he wanted schools to encourage teachers to “teach with creativity and passion; to stop teaching to the test,” but at the same time he wanted schools to “reward the best ones” and “replace teachers who just aren't helping kids learn.” He didn't acknowledge that



the rewards and the punishments he approved would be tied, at his administration's insistence, to test scores.

In response to *Race to the Top*, the number of charter schools grew rapidly. For-profit charter schools expanded, as did virtual charter schools. Neither President Obama nor Secretary Duncan expressed any concern about the risks of deregulating public money to private corporations, nor did they oppose the entry of for-profit entrepreneurs into the charter school market. By advocating for school choice rather than public schools, *Race to the Top* implicitly encouraged not only charters but the other form of school choice: vouchers.

The 2010 elections brought a new crop of far-right governors into office, and these governors warmly embraced charter schools and advocated for vouchers. The Obama administration was silent; after a brief attempt to defund the Washington, D.C., voucher program, the administration gave in to Republican protests and permitted it to continue. As state after state adopted vouchers, the Obama administration raised no protest against the advanced of privatization. Nor did Obama strongly object when the governors of Republican states attacked the collective bargaining rights of public-sector unions. In the spring of 2011, Wisconsin's right-wing governor, Scott Walker, proposed to strip away the collective bargaining rights of most public sector workers, including teachers, and they mounted massive protests in Madison. They surrounded the state capitol and mounted daily protests. President Obama said he sided with the workers but didn't show up in Madison to demonstrate his support. Instead, he and Secretary Duncan flew to Miami in the middle of the Wisconsin protests to praise the former Florida governor Jeb Bush as "a champion of education reform" and to celebrate the successful "turnaround" of Miami Central High School. The national media recognized that President Obama was granting important support to Jeb Bush's policies of testing, accountability, and grading of schools. The national media did not pay attention, however, when the Florida Department of Education announced plans to shutter Miami Central because of its low performance only four months after the meeting with President Obama and Governor Bush. The state granted the school a waiver to avoid closure. Despite some gains, it was still one of the state's lowest-performing high schools.<sup>8</sup>

In his support for charter schools, high-stakes testing, merit pay, and evaluating teachers by test scores, President Obama forged a bipartisan

consensus. But he had strange bedfellows, at least for a Democrat. When I blogged about ALEC and its right-wing agenda for privatization and lowering standards for entry into teaching, the organization's research director responded that President Obama shared credit with ALEC for promoting charter schools and "teaching-profession reforms." During the 2012 election campaign, the only difference between Obama and Mitt Romney in relation to their K-12 policy was that Romney supported vouchers (which he called "opportunity scholarships") and Obama did not.<sup>9</sup>

Neither candidate in the 2012 election supported public education. Both agreed that it was in crisis and that it needed radical change. In their debates, the subject of poverty never came up. Indeed, the subject of education was barely mentioned aside from the candidates' agreement that Race to the Top was a great success.

The public is only dimly aware of the reform movement's privatization agenda. The deceptive rhetoric of the privatization movement masks its underlying goal to replace public education with a system in which public funds are withdrawn from public oversight to subsidize privately managed charter schools, voucher schools, online academies, for-profit schools, and other private vendors.

No matter how many Hollywood movies the corporate reformers produce, no matter how many television specials sing the glories of privatization, no matter how often the reformers belittle the public schools and their teachers, the public is not yet ready to relinquish its public schools to speculators, entrepreneurs, ideologues, snake-oil salesmen, profit-making businesses, and Wall Street hedge fund managers.